

Religion versus Cults

Pastor Joseph Clark – October 2, 2020

“Nxivm ‘sex cult’ Was Also a huge Pyramid Scheme, Lawsuit Says.”

— New York Times

“Jonestown Massacre Takes the Lives of Hundreds in a Mass Suicide Murder Under the Direction of Leader Jim Jones.”

— New York Daily News

“Woman Confesses to Stabbing Mom, Blames Satanic Cult.”

- CBS News

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines Religion as:

- *the service and worship of God or the supernatural*
- *commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance*
- *a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices*
- *a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith*

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines a Cult as:

great devotion to a person, idea, object, movement, or work (such as a film or book)

the object of such devotion

a usually small group of people characterized by such devotion

a system of religious beliefs and ritual

formal religious veneration : WORSHIP

a system for the cure of disease based on dogma set forth by its promulgator

When we compare the two definitions from the dictionary there does not seem to be a significant difference between the two.

What makes a cult dangerous is not in fact what it is. By definition, the existential definition of a cult and a religion is quite similar. Where cults become dangerous is in the following two elements:

- 1) The object or worship
- 2) The execution of the participation of the body. The body being the leaders, prominent members, and general members.

Cults can demonstrate three attributes:

The guru becomes worshipped rather than the broader principles or beliefs.

It has thought reformed-like indoctrination in a systematic way.

Heavy exploitation from above. i.e. Economic, sexual, control.

There is an old saying that one man's cult is one man's religion. Followers of the Nazarene (Jesus) was seen as a cult by local Hebrew and Roman authorities. It would take hundreds of years for the "Christ cult" to become accepted as a religion.

The word Religion is derived from the Latin Religio meaning reverence for God. The word cult comes from the Latin Cultis meaning care, cultivation, worship.

I feel that Bruxy Cavey, author and teaching Pastor at The Meeting House, church, represents the reality of an important aspects of Christ's ministry and teachings:

"I am one of the growing number of people whose lives have been touched by the irreligious spirituality of the rabbi from Nazareth. At the same time, I am deeply saddened and sometimes angered by the variety of ways his teaching and example have been codified, conceptualized, and institutionalized by a religion that bears his name but all too often misses his message."

— Bruxy Cavey, *The End of Religion: Encountering the Subversive Spirituality of Jesus*

Mankind has always been extended freewill by the Lord our God. Faith is a gift, but it is our choice if we choose to receive it. It is of our freewill that we choose to receive Christ's eternal salvation. Christ did not come to establish a legalistic system. He came to do away with the oppression of the existing legalistic system. He brought a new covenant in which man, woman, and God could have a relationship with Christ as the mediator. Mankind cannot help themselves in that we create these hierarchical systems of any team, organization, or faith. With that hierarchy comes a system of conduct, shared principles, pride, and a culture. People cannot associate in a common cause without a culture being created. This is part of our frailty. However, fellowships for the most part tend to be true to Christ's teachings and God's commands. Everything about God, is based on his Grace and the individual accepting that Grace of their own freewill.

When it comes to cults, I have seen fraternities become cults. I have seen Martial Arts organizations become cults. I have seen owner operated corporations that had become cults. I have seen self-improvement groups become cults.

So, what is the difference between a religion and a cult? They are virtually identical in most ways. The difference is that a religion will not oppress or impede one's freewill. A cult will.

Are there Christian cults? Yes. Sadly, there has been and there still is.

How do cults oppress or impede on one's freewill?

- Standard psychological tactics (Intimidation, guilting, controlling, bullying, abuse of authority, brain washing and limiting of one's personal freedom and human rights.
- Misleading the member along an undisclosed course of participation.
- Placing the member under duress, threatening them, assaulting them, or detaining them.
- Isolating the member from friends and family.

What differs greatly between a Christian religious fellowship and a cult is that the Christian religious fellowship's mission is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Whereas a cult's public facing or member facing statement could be identical to this,

but the practices and policies of the organization intrude on the member's freedom and welfare.

An article written by Boze Herrington in The Atlantic on June 18, 2014 states:

“Several years ago, the founder of IHOP, Mike Bickle, created a list of seven ways to recognize the difference between a religious community and a cult. Written down, the signs seem clear:

1. Opposing critical thinking
2. Isolating members and penalizing them for leaving
3. Emphasizing special doctrines outside scripture
4. Seeking inappropriate loyalty to their leaders
5. Dishonoring the family unit
6. Crossing Biblical boundaries of behavior (versus sexual purity and personal ownership)
7. Separation from the Church”

The challenge with cults is that they typically start out one way, and gradually the oppression comes to a slow boil. If they started out as a boil, any new member would leap out of them in the first place. But like any oppressive situation, be it a relationship, an oppressive employment situation, or even a domineering friendship, the participant can become indoctrinated or find themselves in a situation which they must get out of. How bad it gets for them depends on how soon the participant removes themselves from the cult and escapes its effects on their lives.

There is no criminal code legal definition of a cult. The justice system does not differentiate between a cult and a religion. It preoccupies itself with any activity that constitutes the cult operating as a criminal organization.

In 1998 NXIVM was founded by Keith Raniere as a self improvement organization. In 2019 he was found guilty of criminal activity within the organization which included slavery, coercing members into body mutilation in the form of branding, and other crimes. The media and former members labelled it a “sex cult”.

Hot Yoga founder, Bikram Choudhury has been accused of being a predator and using his Yoga organization to allegedly rape and sexually harass members.

In the 1980's a charismatic cult leader named "Michel", formed a cult called Buddhafield in California. He used his influence as a cult leader to be a sexual predator, financial predator, and splinter members from their family.

Most former cult members require significant professional therapy to overcome the destructive psychological effects of their cult participation and experience.

The point of this article is not to provide a comprehensive white paper on the essence of cults. I write this with the following objectives:

- 1) Identify the difference between a Christian fellowship and a cult.
- 2) Illustrate that the two can be almost identical in their public facing professed vision and mission, but that it is in the corrupt practice of it's leaders and members that a religion becomes a cult.
- 3) Identify the red flags or indicators that a fellowship is a cult or is becoming a cult.

The famed theologian and apologist, the late Ravi Zacarias is quoted as saying:

"It doesn't really matter what label you put on a bottle if it is empty. Or if it is dangerously mis-labelled...If you ask me what it takes to be a follower of Jesus Christ, my answer can be brief. If you ask me what it takes to be a member of a particular denomination it will be longer because that denomination can add it's distinctives to find uniformity within that group...I know people in both Catholicism and in Protestantism who are truly followers of Jesus Christ... What is a cult? A cult is anything that deviates from the historic person and work of Jesus Christ or that adds to his teaching and is generally at the instruction of one individual who dictates that belief. It is certainly cultic at that time. Anyone of us whether protestant or Catholic can end up becoming cultic by following one brand of teaching. My answer to you is very simple. You follow Christ as best you know how as revealed in the word of God. And serve him and love him and honor him with your life, in your heart, and your walk and that is what you preach to other's as well. God will be the ultimate judge of what groups went wrong in which direction."

Common indicators of a cult can be one of, or a combination of the following:

Sexual exploitation

Financial exploitation

Exploitation of personal freewill, rights and privacy

Slavery

Shunning

Intimidation

Alienation from one's family or friends who are non-members

Exclusion and bullying from the body for non-conforming

Repercussions and retaliation for leaving the organization

Worship or giving of freewill to the leader or body of the group

Separation of parents from children within the cult itself

Practices involving members humiliating themselves or providing embarrassing personal materials or details that can be used as "collateral" or "leverage" against them.

Is your fellowship cultic in anyway? Have you ever been part of any body or organization that displays any of these cultic attributes? Can a family be cultic? Yes, sadly. As can an employer. There are religious communities today that practice shunning, exclusion, and retaliation if a member exercises their freedom to leave the community or denomination. For that matter, by today's measure the ancient Hebrew community of Christ's time would be considered a cult.

The Holy Spirit tells us in the word related to cults:

"For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win

a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.”

- 2 John 1:7-11

“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.”

– 2 Peter 2:1

“Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.”

- Leviticus 19:31

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,”

- 1 Timothy 4:1

“And he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes who were in the house of the LORD, where the women wove hangings for the Asherah”

- 2 Kings 23:7

Anything that distracts us away from the saving Grace of Jesus Christ, is of the enemy. There are Christian denominations today that make an absolute mockery of God’s word and in doing so, keep those who would otherwise be passionate and

devoted followers of Christ preoccupied with corrupt and false teachings. They are easy to detect because they require the individual to save themselves through works (to the benefit of the leader or organization) or to submit to the leader or the organization, as opposed to choose to receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior of their own freewill.

Psychological manipulation is not limited to cults. It can take place within a relationship between two people. In the case of NXIVM, it began with the leader and then it became part of the culture with key figures in the organization upholding the psychological manipulation and the resulting effects on the members.

I was raised in a Roman Catholic family and I began attending protestant churches when I was in my late thirties. I was born-again and walk my faith in a manner that many label “Evangelical” when I was in my mid-forties. However, in my lifetime I had been on a long spiritual journey involving my reading and studying various religious books, texts, philosophies, and participating in groups and even a fraternity which was supposedly “God centered”. Thank fully this journey lead me to the realization that Jesus Christ is the Way, The Truth, and The Life, and that Nobody comes to the Father EXCEPT THROUGH HIM. When I was nineteen years of age, I took a job with a Toronto firm which provided “success training” to dentists on how to expand their practice. What the employer did not tell me and did not reveal up front to the new clients, is that the entire pedagogy of the training was based on taking scientology courses. My employers were also Scientologists and they had some form of agreement with the church of Scientology to use their content for the courses which they offered. As a result, they also became a potential feeder organization for The Toronto Church of Scientology. I was employed with them for a short period of time. I did not know much about the Church of Scientology, but while I was employed there, I was asked by the employer to go to the Toronto location and discuss the merits of their books. While I was in the Toronto location, my host, a member, brought me upstairs to meet a higher-ranking member who was dressed in a navy type uniform. I was left alone in a room with her and she did a hard sell on me to join the Church of Scientology. During the pitch she took a large wad of cash out of her pocket and asked me if I was ambitious and if I wanted to be able to walk around with that kind of cash in my pocket. To be able to buy anything which I wanted. She made references to my eventually becoming a member like her who was part of an exclusive organization within Scientology in which they make a

symbolic pledge and sign a billion-year contract. I immediately felt a very dark claustrophobic feeling and something in me screamed “Get out of here, now!” I politely excused myself asking for directions to the washroom. On my way to the washroom, I jumped into the first available elevator, took it to the street level, exited the building, jumped into my car, and drove away. As I turned left onto Yonge Street right beside the Church of Scientology building, I saw my host, run out onto the sidewalk looking for me with urgency. She called me that night and left a message for me. I spoke with her the next morning and informed her that I was not comfortable being part of their organization. I also resigned from that employer who was associated with them. This all happened over twenty years prior to my being saved, and eventually being called by the Holy Spirit.

The secular view of a cult seems to be any organization that impedes or interferes with your legal rights and freedoms to well-being.

The Christian view of a cult seems to be any organizational leader or body that distracts, impedes, or distorts one from receiving Christ’s way, truth, and life, and Glorifying God in true accordance with the Gospels.

In closing, God speaks to us through his word and his word is non-complex and cannot be confused as being cultic:

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

- Luke 10:27

“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

- Romans 10:9

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